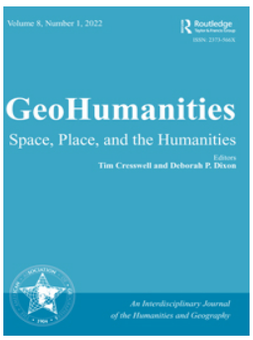

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"Have Car, Can Travel": Journalistic Practice, Oil Entanglements and Climate Reportage in Aberdeen, Scotland

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In August 2017 at 5.30 am, I left my apartment in Edinburgh, Scotland and got in a borrowed car parked across the street. I wanted to make it through the bottleneck at the Forth Road Bridge before the rush hour started. The Scottish Government were building a new crossing as part of a mammoth program of national road upgrades designed to stimulate the economy and increase capacity on the motorway network; the new bridge waiting alongside for its first cars was a political vision made concrete.

I was driving to Aberdeen, capital of the UK oil and gas industry to write a short feature for an American newspaper on Aberdeen's shift to renewable energy (Hinde 2017). In 2014, the city fell victim to a sharp decline in the global oil price, compounded by the ongoing fallout from the 2008 global financial crisis and the period of austerity economics implemented by the British government in its wake. Stories true and apocryphal circulated of people driving to collect food parcels in high-end sports cars and unemployed oil workers with homes too big to sell. The city became a prism through which to understand the longer-term effects of the fossil economy and its volatility, but also a springboard for the development of a nascent renewables sector which—rhetorically at least—promised a new chapter in the region's economic and energy history and a future appropriate to the material realities and needs of climate change and decarbonization.

Using a dual academic and practitioner perspective, here I recount the experience of writing transition narratives in the commercial press through discussion of the article at the heart of the trip, focusing particularly on the entanglement of journalism practice with patterns of extraction and profit, and ultimately the way in which positive transition narratives can mask the enduring dominance of petroculture in the fabric of the journalistic subject. Focusing on the negotiation of media gatekeeping and contrasting it with the reality of fieldwork, it contributes to the theoretical understanding of energy reportage by exploring this dissonance between representation and reality.

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METHOD

Engaging in reflexive practices of journalism-as-ethnography, whilst asserting the overlap of journalism and ethnography as a dual academic/social practice in itself, reflexive fieldwork takes advantage of the realization that in many cases the journalist in action is themselves the research data (Niblock 2012, 507). Similarly, ethnographers such as Venkatesh (2013) have noted the overlap between journalistic practice and ethnographic reflection through their shared focus on the narration and curation of reality, though it is less usual for journalism to turn the lens on itself in this regard. This kind of experiential recounting of real-world media work takes advantage of the duality of authorship of both scholar and precarious practitioners, existing in the area between subject and media in the public space. It is in this space that the entanglements between journalistic practice and its subject become visible, and in which the conduits of power and capital which bind the two are exposed. The performativity of contemporary journalism practice also means that journalists are reluctant to openly discuss their working conditions or the teleological aspects of their practice (Bogaerts 2011), seeking instead to cast themselves as high-status mediators in the public space as a form of ritual. Here, however, I intentionally challenge this performance by critically recounting the experience of climate media work.

Covering such stories of climate on the ground in the contemporary media economy is fraught with challenges. As the media and climate scholar Boykoff (2009) notes, selling climate, and energy transition stories to editorial desks is a difficult proposition that is deeply entangled with the internal politics of the media industry and its judgment of salience and balance, as well as its genre norms. Moreover, even when such stories are given time, the economics of such work remain indifferent to their social importance. The spatiality of such reporting, with the places where energy "happens" often being far-flung and hard to access, requires resources which few newsrooms are prepared to offer, and with little immediate payoff in terms of income or readership.

Through this reflection, I consider four main components: the act of pitching the transition narrative through market gatekeepers, the construction of Aberdeen as an energy city, the cognition of risks and opportunities in the energy city, and lastly, the hidden ways in which oil manifests itself in this ostensibly sustainable story. I then conclude with a brief discussion of the extractive nature of both petro- and media capitalism, arguing for a deeper appreciation of the materialities of media work in the discussion of media representations of climate change, and for the recognition of media as a transnational extractive commodity.

PITCHING THE FUTURE AND MOMENTS OF ACTION

The piece had been pitched as a news feature through an agency based in Berlin that placed stories with the North American media. Over the past decade, foreign correspondence, in line with other branches of journalism, has gone through a period of "gigification," in which media organizations have dispensed with staff positions, and instead come to rely on often precariously employed freelance labor around the world through globe-spanning supply chains (Compton and Benedetti 2010). When topics are outside the usual scope of outlets, journalists with an understanding of the importance or significance of such work must find ways to gain exposure within this global news market.

Furthermore, climate change is a complex phenomenon which reaches into multiple areas of media coverage, both lacking a natural home yet potentially part of multiple stories. It is subject

to a constant process of reinvention to achieve relevance, participating in a reflexive process of normative future building as part of a "sociotechnical imaginary" (Jasanoff 2015) which requires it to buy into existing articulations of the future and the relatively limited temporalities of reportage. It also provides a challenge to the traditional geographies of news, the "representational space that news organizations construct" (Gasher 2015, 130) which struggle with the fact that climate change is happening everywhere at once on an ongoing basis. Climate journalism can also be seen as a cartography of the future, but one which often builds mental maps which are "exacerbating rather than eradicating the distinction between the news world and the material world" (Gasher 2015, 139) through its adherence to existing genres and temporalities.

Such work takes place against the background of a precarious labor market where employers can name their price and take a flexible approach to commissioning. This "new normal" (Örnebring 2018) is an unavoidable reality, as each successful publication represents not so much a career progression as a temporary life raft against the dominant economic trends of the industry. This model of labor also significantly impacts on journalistic form, whereby working conditions influence the content itself (Salamon 2020, 109), precarity leading to a desire to please commissioning editors mindful of their own performance in the labor hierarchy of metric-driven digital journalism. The geographies of contemporary journalism are also heavily dictated by what media and energy anthropologist Boyer (2013) labels "screenwork," whereby opportunities to engage with the real world are limited as journalists spend more and more time at desks, producing increasing amounts of digital copy. Their interaction with the realities they report is thus mediated by the technologies they use and the expected productivity levels they adhere to. The ability to step outside such work and engage in field-based journalism, and to provide newness and relevance through the relative exclusivity of such work, has in the contemporary media landscape become a form of radical practice in itself.

As the journalism scholar Koljonen (2020, 151) notes, one of the challenges to contemporary conditions of media labor is the negotiation of "moments of action" within the media landscape. This negotiation of openings for innovative and transformative storytelling within the constraints of an increasingly brutal and precarious media market is here embodied by the construction of a transition narrative as first pitched to outlets. To even gain permission to undertake the story, the ending already needs to be known before it can pass through gatekeepers in the media supply chain. This gatekeeping theory is common in journalism analysis (see, for example, Vos 2019), but within the fluid landscape of fragmented supply chains and precarious and irregular work new gatekeeping roles emerge, pushing toward an understanding of gatekeeping more akin to that suggested by Barzilai-Nahon (2008) and the concept of multilevel network gatekeepers as conduits in global webs of interaction. In the case of the Aberdeen transition story there were two main gatekeepers—a news agency in Berlin and the foreign desk of the newspaper in Maryland in the USA, to which I formed the lowest rung of a chain of extractive process, pitching a ready-refined product. The pitch for the story read as follows:

> Slug: UK-Aberdeen
>
> Pitch: Boomtown Aberdeen's bust
>
> Until the 1970s, Aberdeen was an old fishing port on the wane. Then, when oil was found offshore, it became "Scotland's Texas," making the city the wealthiest in Britain outside London. Today, the

> low price of oil as well as depleted oil fields have hit the area hard. Unemployed oil workers have turned to food banks and fear losing their homes. But the city's seacoast, among the windiest and stormiest in Europe, is now offering a new opportunity: Many of the skills in the oil industry are perfect for building wave and wind turbines in the area's violent waters. As Britain leaves the EU and the Paris Climate Agreement is under fire, locals hope Europe's oil capital can become an unlikely leader in tackling climate change – with wind.

The pitch was designed to appeal specifically to the target publication, making reference to the idea of "Scotland's Texas," but also loosely to the idea of tackling climate change and that the structures of energy capitalism were ready-made for the transition to green technological innovation. The pitch also tied it to the "hooks" of Britain's need for industrial renewal as it sought to leave the European Union and the Paris Climate Agreement, which had become an object of controversy in US politics. By offering an analogy to the situation in the US, and thus by applying a broadly North American frame, the story legitimized itself. This frame would also eventually end up as the story's headline: *Aberdeen, known as Scotland's "Texas" turns to green energy after oil boom turns to bust*. This framing thus became the center around which the journalistic fieldwork of the piece was formed and which dictated the practice of constructing the story on the ground in Aberdeen.

THE PETRO-CITY AND (THE) ENERGY CAPITAL

This frame of Aberdeen as Scotland's "Texas," complete with a set of assumptions about the Texan oil industry, the nature of the postwar oil boom, and the dominance of the petro-economy establishes Aberdeen, along with a select number of other cities around the world as a "petropolis." This canon of urban landscapes dotting the earth, from Baku to Kirkuk, Fort McMurray and Murmansk form "hubs of corporate power in the universe of Big Oil" (Watts 2011, 65), energy capitals which are also cogs in the machine of international capital. Passing through these petrolandscapes, they are at once both familiar but a source of fascination, as is the story of the resource boom town and the well-established narrative cycle of growth, huge riches, and subsequent rapid decline. In following this line, the story immediately situates itself within an established genre of post-industrial journalism, and moreover one in which American readers are able to easily grasp the parallels between Aberdeen and Houston or any of the other petro-cities around the world. Walking down Union St. Aberdeen's main strip, looking for voices to interview, brand-new Hydrogen buses swing round the corner in front of pawn shops and secondhand stores with rental signs. The oil itself is distant, out at sea, so it is easy to recast the city as liminal, in transition (Figure 1). It is here that Aberdeen possesses a narrative potential to develop alternative futures, yet this genre is also self-limiting as it constructs a good news story about the scale of transition which belies the fact that the city continues to remain hugely reliant on both fossil energy and fossil capital.

The idea of innovation and ecological modernization providing a solution to both climate change and economic stagnation is a powerful and easy one to tell though, so this is the story I began to build. As Painter (2016, 41) notes in his overview of contemporary environmental journalisms, ecomodernist journalists are able to reject "doom and gloom" by adhering to the broad genre principles of capitalist modernity in their discussion of the

FIGURE 1 Pawnbrokers and charity shops (thrift stores) on Union Street, Aberdeen.

climate crisis by producing positive climate narratives. This genre trap functions as another form of gatekeeping whereby narrative study of the real impacts of climate gives way to deterministic and temporally fixed genres of expectation around modernization. Quite intentionally, no attempt is made to transcend these genre norms, partially for fear of being caught up in editorial exchanges with no financial compensation, but also because of the need for a simplified dramatic thread.

RISK AND OPPORTUNITY IN THE CLIMATE CITY

Despite my own concern about and engagement with climate change, I constructed the story around the core ideas of renewal and timeliness rather than with climate change itself as an imperative driver of action, while its material impacts are not mentioned at all. This conscious decision, reflected in the original pitch, allowed for the inclusion of climate change as a topic in the article but simultaneously mitigates it. Contrary to the good economic news, climate risk is widespread in Aberdeen, not least because the city faces directly onto the North Sea where predictions show an increased risk of storm surges and flash flooding as a result of climate change (Aberdeen City Council 2014). I interviewed and photographed one of the voices in the final article, young oil worker, and transition campaigner Guy, on the Aberdeen beachfront (Figure 2), a picture which the editors also chose to accompany the text in the print edition. The

FIGURE 2 Oil industry worker Guy photographed on the Esplanade, Aberdeen.

beachfront is one of the places most vulnerable to extreme weather in the region, with low-lying land immediately behind it a potential victim of storm surges. The scale of climate change itself has never been fully revealed or acknowledged, however. Instead, climate and energy transitions are made to assume the role of other ecomodernist features of the eco-capitalist narrative, whereby renewables are a nod to future adaptation and competitiveness which will allow the city to maintain its place as an energy capital, a good news story about the "good Anthropocene" (Bennett et al. 2016).

Professional voices I found for the piece included a spokesperson for the Swedish energy company Vattenfall and a representative of the city-run Aberdeen Renewable Energy Group, a publicly funded umbrella for local business. Reluctant to engage with the existential implications of their work, they instead presented a joint front listing job figures and capacity, losing their anxieties in statistics. Local government, operating in an environment where the fossil industry has far superior resources, position themselves primarily as the lubricators of business machinery rather than as a group with democratic agency. Although keen to profile the wide array of renewable projects in the region, this was achieved through the language of business development, strategic partnerships, and the longstanding idea of marketing Aberdeen as the "Energy Capital of Europe."

This confidence in the ability of petroculture to morph into a renewable business was everywhere. I interviewed and included three people in the piece who did not represent business or governance; all at some level illustrated the precarity of employment in the city, and intentionally so, yet the story presents them as victims of circumstance and not as casualties of the footloose capital of multinational

oil. Two, activist Guy and food bank volunteer Michelle, were former oil industry workers trying to deal with the decline in the local economy. The third, Niall, was a young waiter in a coffee bar who had never had full time employment but did not want to have to leave the city, bound to it for reasons stretching beyond work. Despite the huge violence done by the petro-economy, disentanglement, and transition remained distant objectives. The twin crises of poverty and climate risk are omnipresent, but among the relative optimism of the article there were few solutions, not least because of its assumption that poverty and precarity could be ended merely by the creation of more jobs. Guy's final quote was "we don't want to end up like a coal town," not because of coal's climate impact, but rather the need to find an equally profitable alternative.

WORKING AT THE SPEED OF OIL

Oil is felt not only in the fabric of the city but also in the work itself. After my interview with Guy on the city beachfront I gave him a lift home in my battered car (Figure 3); for him to get from his workplace to the house where he lived with his mother would have involved two buses and over an hour's journey on congested roads, so I dropped him at the end of his street. Zygmunt Bauman's maxim "have car, can travel" (2000, 59) as a feature of the precarious

FIGURE 3 The third hand 2001 Ford focus estate car used for the trip.

mobility of labor applied to both of us. In contemporary Britain cars have become a basic tool of subsistence in the precarious and temporary austerity economy (Curl, Clark, and Kearns 2018). Rather than taking labor to static sites of work, however, in journalism mobility entails being able to travel cheaply and flexibly to the site of the story and enact the liquid capitalism Bauman describes, embodying the lightness and fluidity of media labor.

Journalism is itself an extractive process, in which stories are taken from their location, processed and refined, and exported around the world through the pipelines of the global news market. The beaten-up car piloted from point to point was a means of transport, but it was also a mobile office in itself, a way to remain out of the Aberdeenshire wind and rain, and to navigate the city's maze of slip roads, dual carriageways, and traffic filters on the hunt for quality product to sell. Journalists jump pathways, moving sideways from point to point, and in the oil city these places have oil-spatialities which can only be accessed through the car. It is from behind the wheel that Aberdeen's petro-spaces are most visible; it is not merely somewhere you drive to, but somewhere you drive around, a socio-technical system which "organises flows of information, population, petroleum oil, risks and disasters, images and dreams" (Sheller and Urry 2006, 209). There was even an expectation on the part of interviewees that car travel was part of the journalistic toolkit, and directions would be given based on driving time and ease of parking. To be without a car in the oil city is to not have the full faculties of social life.

The budget stretched to one night in a discount hotel, meaning I had to speed up the reporting to collect all of the necessary parts in good time, plus some extra material as insurance. Without a salary, the constant turnover of work means too long spent on one story is lost income from another. This lubricity is also, however, counter to the need to slow down which the story so obviously required, what Dowling (2016) calls "deep storytelling's alternative economies," in which depth and situation takes precedent over profit and efficiency of delivery. Speed and the commodification of time robs subjects of their complexity, reducing them to assets who function as quote banks and archetypes in the story largely already written. The car journey back to Guy's house continued as part of the interview, and we discussed the realities of local transport and work, at odds with the company line on sustainable economic renewal.

As Macdonald (2017) has argued of the physical visibility of oil in Aberdeen, it is ever present but usually stretches out of sight underground or at sea. When oil itself (rather than its processes and effects) is rendered invisible in the petropolis, the illusion of sustainability is easier to convey, aided by visual cues from around the city such as Hydrogen buses, electric car charging points, and the building sites for renewable energy installations. Even so, the city still works at liquid speed. Aberdeen remains largely dependent on the fossil industry and its renewable sector remains only a small fraction of the local economy. Additionally, the move to renewables is a complementary strategy rather than a singular one, with wide acceptance in business and government that fossil extraction will remain the main focus of Aberdeen and the region's economy. To invoke the work of the political theorists Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright, it tells a comforting story about the legitimacy of an energy leviathan as a path to sustainability, where "Capitalism itself is not a question on the table, but rather treated as the solution to climate change" (Wainwright and Mann 2013, 7). The truth is that Aberdeen may claim to be an energy capital, but it remains deeply entangled specifically with petrocapitalism, confirming Imre Szeman's observation that "from oil flows capitalism as we still know it" (2007, 806), and it is here that the liquid pace of oil capitalism and the fastness of contemporary journalism find their parallels. Leaving Aberdeen with my good news story in hand, I crossed under the unopened new four lane

highway skirting the city limits and joined the stream of commuter traffic into the summer twilight. I checked my petrol gauge and wondered if I could still make a tiny profit on the job.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Here I have attempted to illustrate how a piece of commercial press work, not merely in its narrative but in the material processes of its creation, exists within an entanglement of transnational capital, energy, and communications, a hegemony which makes itself both invisible and inevitable. Within contemporary debates about the media's role in communicating climate change and creating visions of the future, greater understandings of the conditions of media work as it relates to these processes of story building allow a more developed critique than merely asserting that the media should cover these issues more or differently. Such practice makes clear how both journalist and subject are deeply entangled and subject to similar processes of power and limitation, a situation which they both accommodate and resist. The green energy city of the positive narrative is thus a genre trap, and the promised transition presents as chimeric impossibility as the petropolis and its associated problems remain.

By examining both journalism and energy in terms of their position as transnational commodities, it becomes clearer that transition as both a material and narrative project requires disrupting and challenging these flows. As the value of time and labor rises or falls in the news markets and demand for journalistic product fluctuates, media capitalism constrains its stories through its own demands for fluidity and speed and its appetite for product it can distribute to end consumers. It is possible to tell good news stories about the future of media work, just as it is easy to craft an energy transition narrative from a few carefully chosen subjects and some selective presentation, yet in approaching both, an understanding of the scale of the leviathan and the limits it sets is critical.

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